

Safe Above Ground in Newcastle

NEWCASTLE, OK – One year after Ronda and Billy Johnson installed a safe room in their garage, their home was totally destroyed by a tornado. It proved a wise investment because that safe room saved their lives that day.

A powerful EF-5 tornado ripped through Newcastle, Oklahoma, and nearby communities on May 20, 2013, destroying homes and taking 24 lives. Ronda and her daughters, Kylie and Raylee, plus two family dogs, took shelter from the storm in the safe room.

“We had always wanted a safe room and when my husband built an unattached garage on the property we decided that this was the perfect place and time to purchase a safe room,” said Ronda.

The garage was just a few feet from the house and the safe room would be easy to access in an emergency. Rather than build underground, the Johnsons decided to purchase an above-ground safe room – a six-by-eight foot concrete box anchored to the garage slab and accessed via a steel door with a triple latch system. The room is equipped with electricity and supplies including a flashlight in case the electricity goes out.

After installation, the Johnsons registered their safe room with the local fire department in case they needed to be rescued following a storm. By the time the 2013 tornado hit, they had already utilized the \$3,500 unit four or five times, all of them false alarms. And that’s what they expected when the alarm was raised again on May 20.

“My daughters and I were getting ready for graduation night at Newcastle High School,” Ronda recalled. “The sirens began sounding and we received a call from my brother, who lives in Edmond, OK, that we needed to get into the shelter. We hurriedly gathered the dogs and we all got into the shelter.” About three minutes later the tornado hit.

“It was the loudest sound I have ever heard,” said Kylie. “I had to cover my ears.”

“I could hear flying debris hitting the safe room,” added Ronda. “After it was over, neighbors came to see if we were all right and to help us out of the shelter because debris was partially blocking the door. Everything was gone and we did not anticipate that. There were no walls left standing on the house or the garage. We did not have a wall left. We walked out to nothing.”

Ronda is no stranger to the destruction and dangers that accompany tornadoes. In 1999, her father’s house in Moore, OK was destroyed by a tornado. Ronda lived nearby at the time, and she and Kylie rode out that storm in a closet.

“During this recent storm, if there had been no safe room, we would have probably gotten in the bath tub,” said Ronda. “That would not have been good. After the tornado, the bathtub was gone and we don’t know where it went. No signs of it anywhere.”

“Living in Oklahoma, tornadoes are something you just have to live with, but you don’t really think it’s going to happen to you,” said Kylie. “You think it is only going to happen to other people.”



“We’re going to build back in the same place and we’re not afraid because we have a safe room,” said Ronda. “Now the way I look at it, everyone needs to have a safe room.”

For more information on safe rooms, log onto: www.FEMA.gov/safe-rooms.



This safe room saved the family life.